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(Collection of Dr. Christian Brinton)*

ALFONS-MARIE MUCHA

HISTORICAL PAINTINGS OF THE SLAVIC NATIONS BY ALFONS MUCHA

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION
BY DR. CHRISTIAN BRINTON
NOTES ON THE PAINTINGS
BY PROF. ŠÁRKA HRBKOVÁ



THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM
1921

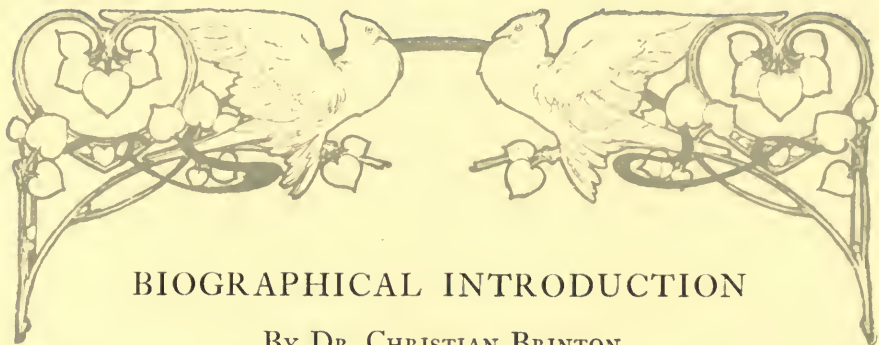
THE historical paintings of the Slavic Nations by Alfons Mucha, exhibited at The Brooklyn Museum, and The Art Institute of Chicago, under the auspices of Director William Henry Fox, are part of the series of twenty subjects presented to the city of Prague by Mr. Charles R. Crane, Minister to China.



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BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

BY DR. CHRISTIAN BRINTON



HE gifted and versatile painter of the pictorial epic of the Slavic nations here exhibited, is a typical Czech in his traditions, his aspirations, and his artistic achievement. Alfons-Marie Mucha, to give him his full name, was born July 24, 1860, at Ivančicie, in Moravia. Some beneficent *Vila* must have blessed him at birth with the flame of art, for his earliest impressions were of form and colour. Before he could speak or walk, he remembers lying in his capacious wooden cradle and gazing rapturously at the shimmering lights of the family Christmas tree. He grew up a bright eyed, curly haired youngster, possessed of irrepressible vivacity and a pronounced taste for drawing. As a child he was frequently left in charge of his grandmother Malý, who delighted in his talent and often rewarded his juvenile efforts with judicious gifts of sweetmeats. His mother, however, wished him to become a priest, so he was sent at the age of ten to Brno, the capital, where he was for a time a choir boy in the Metropolitan Cathedral.

Yet the aspiring Alfons clung tenaciously to the idea of becoming an artist, and at sixteen we find him attending the College of Brno, and caring more for his drawing lessons than for all the other courses combined. Possessing but modest means, he was obliged to share his room with a student, poorer even than himself, and from about the middle of each month, when their united resources were exhausted,



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I. SVANTOVÍT CELEBRATION

they were usually in sorry straits for food. Virtually all they had to subsist upon was a huge round loaf of black bread and a can of pork grease which the room-mate's peasant family was in the habit of supplying at stated intervals. And Mucha, being the more accomplished draughtsman of the two, would scientifically mark off with chalk the exact amount of bread to be consumed each day, the pork grease serving as butter.

The lad's love of art was so persistent, and his ability so exceptional, that his master, Zelený, a benign, bearded old man who habitually arrayed himself in a long black cloak and high boots, persuaded him to seek admission to the Academy of Fine Arts at Prague. Lhota, the director of the academy proved, however, distinctly pessimistic regarding the young man's capacity for artistic expression, and summarily admonished him to renounce his ambitions and become a government clerk. Discouraged but not dis-

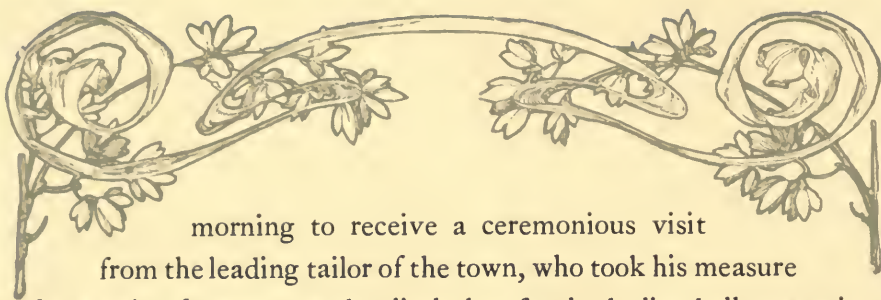


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II. THE ABOLITION OF SERFDOM

heartened, he next set out for Vienna, where he worked for some months on the decorations for the new Ring Theatre, and finally drifted, penniless, to Mikulov. Here he remained a year or more, executing portrait sketches of the townsfolk at five florins each; and here also he was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of Count Khuen Belasy, of Grusbach, who became his patron and after a year's sojourn at his castle of Gandegg, enabled the artist to pursue his studies in Munich and Paris.

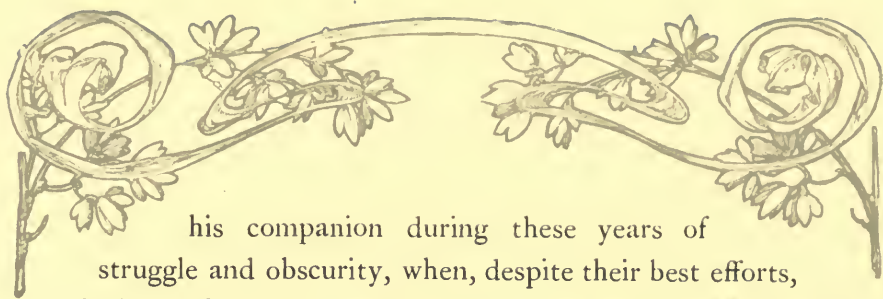
In order to maintain the requisite social prestige, the young painter felt constrained to stop at The Lion, Mikulov's leading hostelry. Being both witty and musical, he was invited about considerably, despite the fact that his wardrobe was perilously shabby. At one period his single pair of trousers was in such precarious condition that his only expedient was to wear his topcoat throughout the evening, on the plea of suffering from chronic chills. After a certain number of appearances under these conditions, he was surprised one



morning to receive a ceremonious visit from the leading tailor of the town, who took his measure for a pair of trousers and politely but firmly declined all suggestion of payment. Although not a little puzzled, Mucha subsequently appeared in the trousers, and was enthusiastically complimented upon their cut, colour, etc. It was not until some twenty years later, when he had become a famous artist, that the sequel came in the form of a letter from Berger, a prominent townsman, asking whether Mucha recalled the incident, and adding that the trousers in question had been a spontaneous gift from the young ladies of Mikulov.

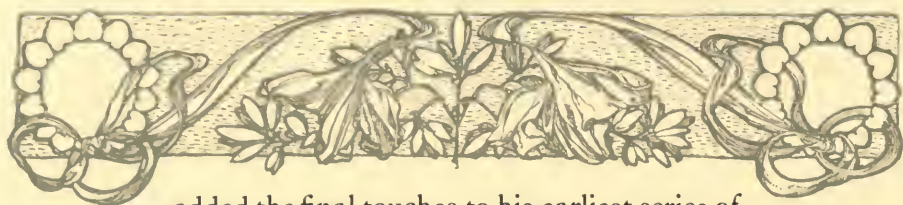
During Mucha's sojourn in Munich, which lasted some two years, he was a joyous, picturesque member of the Czech colony of the day which included such well-known figures as Vácha, Brožík, and Marolda. This auspicious interlude was, however, followed by a sharper contact with reality and the bitter sting of poverty, for shortly after his arrival in Paris in 1887, Count Khuen ceased his patronage, and the young man was thrown upon his own resources, with the added handicap of an imperfect knowledge of the French language. He lived for a time in the impasse du Maine, and later in the rue de la Grande Chaumière, dreaming resplendent dreams of success and renown, and meantime supporting himself upon the meagre income he derived from book and magazine illustration.

Though working for *La Vie Populaire* and kindred publications sometimes as much as sixteen hours a day, he nevertheless managed to pursue his professional training, and at different intervals studied at the Académie Julien, with Boulanger and Lefebvre, at the Académie Colarossi, and lastly under Jean-Paul Laurens. Vácha was



his companion during these years of struggle and obscurity, when, despite their best efforts, not the least of their problems was how to placate père Michaud, the restaurateur at the corner, and yet continue their system of living upon credit. The young man's position in the world of art and finance was not indeed perceptibly alleviated until Colin commissioned him to illustrate Charles Seignobos's *Histoire d'Allemagne*, in collaboration with Rochegrosse, the success of which placed him in the front rank of contemporary pictorial draughtsmen.

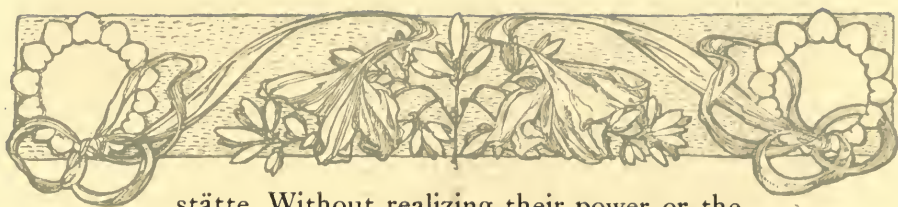
Mucha's Paris apprenticeship was not without its picturesque features. His modest quarters at number 13, rue de la Grande Chaumière were located above the crèmerie kept by Madame Charlotte, a true patron of art and artists. Here used to foregather Strindberg, Gauguin, Vispenskij, the Pole, and the faithful Vácha before his departure for Switzerland. They formed a close and congenial circle, and were in the habit of dining together almost every evening *chez* Madame Charlotte. Strindberg, always a trifle austere, was at that particular period deeply absorbed in photographic and chemical researches, though often he would mount the rickety stairs and silently survey the pulsing panorama of Paris from the roof-top, or stroll abstractedly in the Cimetière du Montparnasse, meditating upon some novel or play. Gauguin was restless, talkative, and not over-industrious until he returned from his first island sojourn burning with enthusiasm for the primitive solitude and the wondrous *Vénus noires* he had left behind. And it is interesting in this connexion to recall that it was in Mucha's humble studio just across the way, at number 10, rue de la Grande Chaumière, that Gauguin



added the final touches to his earliest series of Tahitian paintings before they were placed on tentative exhibition.

Successful as were his illustrations, Alfons Mucha's position in art was not, however, definitely established in the popular mind until the appearance upon the walls of Paris of his remarkable series of posters for Madame Sarah Bernhardt's dramatic productions at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. Beginning with *Gismonda* in 1894, and continuing for some half dozen years with *Camille*, *La Samaritaine*, *Izevl*, *Lorenzaccio*, and the more forceful and effective *Médée*, these posters, as well as the costumes and scenery for the plays, which were likewise designed by Mucha, marked an epoch in the history of contemporary decorative art.

The vogue of Alfons Mucha's work in fact coincided with, and contributed its exotic charm to a general rebirth of the decorative and the stylistic as opposed to the realistic tendencies of aesthetic expression. The veritable initiator of the movement was Galland, now a comparatively forgotten man, who may be called the last of the classicists and the first of the moderns. And after Galland came Chéret, the Watteau of the poster, ever delicate, spirited, and typically Parisian; Grasset, who successfully assimilated influences Japanese and Teutonic, Carlos Schwabe, the Swiss mystic, and Mucha, Ruty, and others whose work was different, yet whose aims were essentially similar. It is these men who to-day must be considered the founders of what is popularly known as *l'Art nouveau*. It was their gift of style, their mastery of purely decorative motifs, that in due course led to the formation of such organizations as the Munich and Vienna Secessions, and to the creation of those innumerable arts and crafts centres at the head of which rightfully stands the Wiener Werk-



stätte. Without realizing their power or the extent of their influence, this group added a new note to contemporary artistic endeavour. They made art an affair of the theatre, the home, and the shop, rather than the exclusive possession of palace and museum. In a sense they were our first really creative modernists.

The aesthetic aspect of the movement, which was above all characterized by a rhythmic, inventive sense of stylization, and a singular freedom and suavity of vision, seemed best exemplified in the personality and production of Alfons Mucha. First through his posters, and later through his religious and historical compositions, he became an exponent of that new decorative idealism which at this period was so prominent alike in art and in letters. The supple flow of his line, his profuse use of ornament, and his passionate lyric aspiration all reflected the current taste of the day. A typical oriental Slav, Mucha's rightful province was not Paris, nor even Prague, but the gardens of Semiramis and the palace of Scheherezade. Like Ros-tand, Pierre Louÿs, Robert de Flers, and the popular poets and playwrights of the early and middle nineties, he also harked back to Italy, to Greece, and to Byzantium in quest of themes heroic or amorous. For he, too, was a lover of Princesses *lointaines*.

And yet this art at once floral, astral, and feminine, which revealed with tender nonchalance the supple beauty of the body, and the delicately veiled secrets of the soul, was not destined to be Alfons Mucha's final expression. These sumptuous, hieratic creatures, crowned with the jewels of Théodora, and exhaling the passionate perfume of Ilsée, Princesse of Tripoli, were succeeded by work of a more serious and substantial character. If anything further were necessary to confirm the success of the young Czech with the public

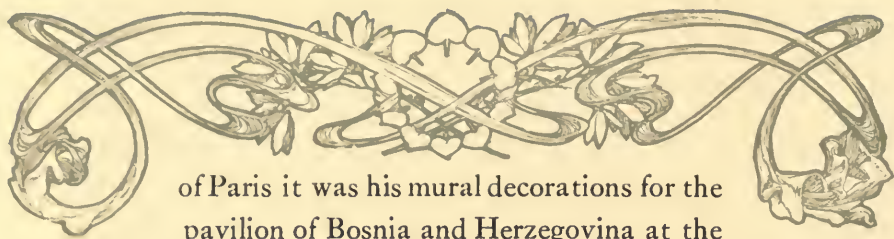


IV. JAN HUS PREACHING IN



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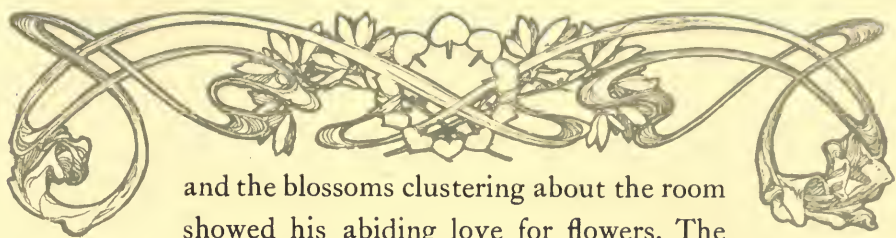
THE CHAPEL OF BETHLEHEM



of Paris it was his mural decorations for the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the Exposition Universelle, 1900. Here at last was a congenial commission. A profound student of the history of his race, and familiar from childhood with the myths and legends of the Slavs of southeastern Europe, it is natural that these panels should have been executed more as a labour of love than in an official or perfunctory spirit. In order to refresh his memory of native costume, and of forms floral and architectural, the artist made an extended tour of the country. And yet the charm of the completed compositions lay not in their fidelity to the actual, but in their flowing rhythmic grace, and their felicitous coloration, grouping, and arrangement. They were in fact the feature of that fantastic, red-roofed, blue-walled pavilion which stood in the rue des Nations between the more pretentious Austrian and Hungarian palaces.

Appropriately installed in commodious quarters at number 6, rue Val-de-Grâce, Mucha next began working upon a series of decorations for the Assumptionist Church of the Virgin in Jerusalem, and also on a cycle of graphic compositions depicting symbolically the Seven Deadly Sins. Successful exhibitions of his work at La Bodinière and the Salon des Cent had meanwhile attracted to him numerous pupils, and about this period he opened an atelier in the passage Stanislas, whither flocked students from nearly every country in Europe, not to mention numerous admiring Americans of both sexes.

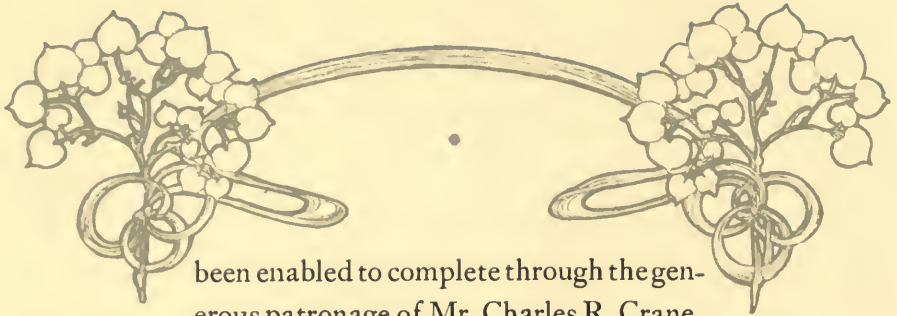
The Val-de-Grâce studio, which one instinctively recalls in reviewing Mucha's Paris days, was typical of the man and his art. The roses and clematis that during spring and summer beckoned to the door,



and the blossoms clustering about the room showed his abiding love for flowers. The rich-toned tapestries and the massive silver censer suspended from the ceiling gave the place the air of a secular sanctuary. The surroundings were characteristic, for this work in its more congenial phases is sumptuous, colourful, and essentially Slavonic. The youthful acolyte in the Cathedral of Brno has remained all his life a fervent churchman, and his compositions, whether realistic, decorative, or imaginative, reflect a certain sacerdotal spirit. Solemn as a Slavic ritual, and suave as the smile upon the lips of some languorous oriental enchantress, the art of Alfons Mucha reveals a subtle fusion of piety and passion. It seems to have flashed out of a mystic, sensuous past, and to point toward an enigmatic future.



The adequate pictorial presentation of the rise and development of the Czech nation, as well as kindred branches of the Slavic race, is the task to which Alfons Mucha has devoted the past decade of his artistic activity. Many years ago when he was living in Paris, the painter conceived the idea of a great cycle of mural decorations which, through the portrayal of actual historical episodes, should symbolize the character and aspirations of the Slavic peoples, and the current exhibition forms part of this uncompleted series, the most important and ambitious work yet undertaken by the artist. Mucha felt that if he could successfully depict the progressive evolution of the Slavs from the most ancient to the present times, he would be accomplishing something of lasting value; a plan he has

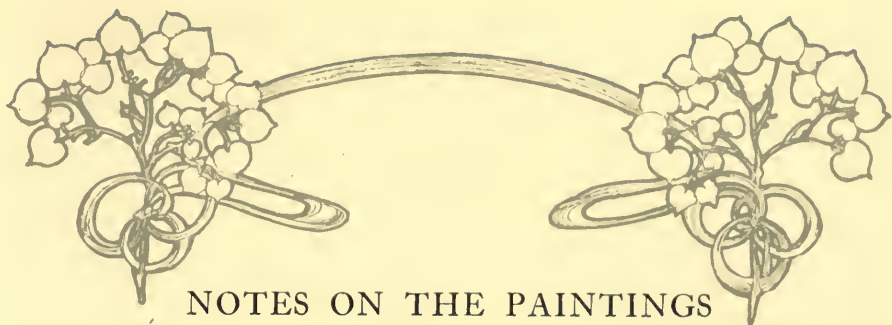


been enabled to complete through the generous patronage of Mr. Charles R. Crane,

our present minister to China. Possessing a remarkable insight into the ethnic characteristics of the Slavic races, and deeply interested in their history and ultimate political destiny, Mr. Crane has supported the plan from its inception, feeling sure that this pictorial epic of the Slavs would find place in one of the great Slavic capitals.

Of the projected series of twenty subjects eleven have thus far been completed, and recently Mr. Crane and the artist decided to offer the paintings to the Czecho-Slovak people if they would guarantee to install them under conditions befitting their merit and importance. The suggestion was received with enthusiasm, the outcome being a pledge from the Czech government to erect a public building in Prague, the walls of which will eventually be decorated with Mucha's Epic of Slavia.

The presence in our midst of the artist, who is well known in America, adds particular interest to the current exhibition of five of these imposing mural compositions, which so graphically depict the determination of the Slavic peoples to cast off the yoke of the oppressor, whether temporal or spiritual, and achieve a more definite measure of race consciousness. Alfons Mucha is an ardent apostle of nationalism in art, and later on he intends to devote his energies to the organization of a comprehensive exposition of the arts and crafts of his native land, a land that has always been noted for the aesthetic and musical genius of its people—the new and aspiring Republic of Czecho-Slovakia.



NOTES ON THE PAINTINGS

BY PROF. ŠÁRKA HRBKOVÁ

I. SVANTOVÍT CELEBRATION ON THE RUJANA

FROM ancient times the Eastern Germany of to-day, to the very edge of the Baltic sea and even to its islands, was populated by Slavs, and their advanced culture was justly recognized by the rest of Europe. The branch which had the greatest fame was the branch of the Rans who dwelt in the Island of Rujana, whose capital was the rich city of Arkuna. In this city was the famous Cathedral of Svantovít, whose artistic beauty aroused the admiration of foreigners visiting there from the land of the Franks, Spain, and even from Byzantium. Visitors from the entire world of that day came to Arkuna, not only to transact business, but also, as with the Greek Delphians, in order to ask of the world-famous priests of Svantovít advice and revelations concerning the things of the future. Once a year, after the harvests, Arkuna was filled with song, and the shore-land along the chalk cliffs resounded with joyful celebrations in honour of the god Svantovít. This celebration had taken place annually from time out of mind until the end of the thirteenth century, when the Germanic Danes sailed hither, conquered Arkuna, and destroyed the chapel of Svantovít.

In the picture we see how the Teutonic Thor with his wolves has overwhelmed the cortège of Svantovít. His last warrior is dying on the sacred white steed. Svantovít is at his side and takes from his failing right hand the holy sword, and from that time on he gives



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III. MILIČ OF KROMĚŘÍŽ



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V. THE MEETING OF KRÍŽKY



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I. SVANTOVÍT CELEBRATION (DETAIL)

battle to Thor. Then the German yoke falls on the Slavs, and with it subjugation, misery, and ruin. Art is forced to flee. Below the artist-engraver seeks to find inspiration in himself and to resurrect the old Slav aspiration and feeling.

II. THE ABOLITION OF SERFDOM IN RUSSIA

IN FEBRUARY, 1861, personal liberty became the possession of the Russian people. By a manifesto of the Tzar, serfdom was abolished throughout the Russian realm. The *mužik* as peasant had previously been a subject of his noble proprietor, who had every right to his time, labour, and person. In return for all of this, the poor *mužik* received scarcely enough to subsist upon.

The ukase decreeing liberty, made of the slave a free citizen. The picture represents the square before the Kremlin of Moscow in the shadow of the cathedral of St. Vasilij. Here are gathered people from the town and from the country—those who were serfs up to that day.



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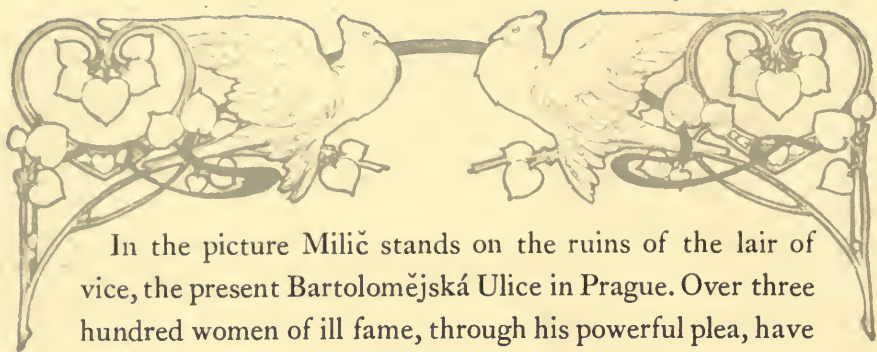
IV. HUS PREACHING IN THE CHAPEL (DETAIL)

From the red platform, a raised circular place from which important events were announced to the people and also where persons of note had been executed, one beholds the departure, in long processions, of the officials and the priests with their ikons. The common people remain—they debate—deliberate—thank God—give praise, but do not yet quite comprehend the meaning of their new liberty.

III. MILIČ OF KROMĚŘÍŽ

THE HUSSITE RELIGIOUS PERIOD

MILIČ OF KROMĚŘÍŽ was the predecessor of Jan Hus. He was a man inspired by religious fervour and was the first who by spoken word dared to oppose the vices of his time in the voluptuous middle ages. By his flaming eloquence, he held the people of all strata of society, and aroused a current of religious enthusiasm which grew and developed after fifty years into the powerful Hussite movement.



In the picture Milič stands on the ruins of the lair of vice, the present Bartolomějská Ulice in Prague. Over three hundred women of ill fame, through his powerful plea, have turned from their evil lives. They come to him—renouncing their ornaments and jewels and beg for absolution.

King Charles the Fourth made a gift to Milič of this land in order that he might erect upon it a New Jerusalem for penitent women.

IV. HUS PREACHING IN THE CHAPEL OF BETHLEHEM

THE HUSSITE RELIGIOUS PERIOD

IN THE year 1412 when three young men belonging to the congregation of Jan Hus were murdered for investigating the so-called miracle performed in the church of Prague, the adherents of the parish lived in constant excitement. The people of all elements of society attended the preaching of Jan Hus, paying the most careful attention to his words, for he it was who unveiled the vicious doings of those who claimed to be servants of God, but lived unrighteous lives and countenanced wicked practices. Even Jan Žižka, who later became the leader of the Hussite army, was frequently present at the preaching of Jan Hus. On the seat, at the right hand side of the picture, may be seen Queen Sophia, wife of Vaclav the Fourth, and beside her are the court ladies.



V. THE MEETING OF KŘÍŽKY

THE HUSSITE LEADERS PERIOD

(Transition from the Religious period to the War period.)

AFTER the death of Hus, it became more and more dangerous to hold the meetings of the brethren who believed in communion of “both kinds,” i.e. both body and blood of Christ—the bread and the wine, to be participated in by all of the people as well as by the priests. When in 1419 they decided to aid Prague against the King’s forces, they were compelled to arm themselves. Thus, for the first time in their history, they were called together in military groups by the Plzeň preacher, Koranda. They gathered from all quarters and directions on St. Michael’s Day in the broad valley of Křížky near Benešov, from which place they advanced in a mass towards Prague.

In the picture, Koranda stands on the roof of a hut, and with several chiefs he gazes into the distance. From every side the faithful are gathering. Some come on foot, others on horseback, or in carriages to the meeting place which is designated by flags. The new arrivals are occupied variously. Some are preparing for the night’s rest, others are kneeling around the priests and are accepting communion.





ALFONS-MARIE MUCHA
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